

## **New Pope Benedict anoints religious fundamentalism**

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With the death of Pope John Paul II, a major pillar of the retrogressive politics of the past 25 years has left the scene. Unfortunately, his replacement, Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger), is the one that progressives within the Roman Catholic Church had feared the most. While no one can predict all of the specific policies that Benedict XVI will put forth, it seems clear that the leadership of the world's wealthiest and most powerful religious institution will continue along the general pathway laid out by John Paul II.

Because he was John Paul II's top advisor for 25 years, Benedict XVI is intimately connected to the policies of his predecessor. He is also familiar with the Left. After espousing more progressive politics during the era of Vatican II in the early 1960s, Benedict moved sharply to the Right after witnessing the student protests of 1968 at the University of Tübingen.

### **LINK TO REAGAN, THATCHER**

The selection of the anti-Marxist, anti-feminist John Paul II in 1978 took place only a year before the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister of Britain, and two years before that of Ronald Reagan to the U.S. presidency. Together, these three turned the clock back on the progressive and revolutionary heritage of the 1960s.

Together, they worked to roll back the revolutionary movements of Latin America, to crush organized labor in the name of the "free market," to undermine racial minority and civil rights movements, to attack the feminist and gay/lesbian movements, and to put a right-wing stamp on the movements for freedom in Eastern Europe.

Together, they created a whole new ideology of conservatism that attacked the failures of welfare state capitalism in the West and of totalitarian state-capitalism calling itself Communism in the East. They used the most modern means of communication to promote a return to a harsher sexual "morality" of the past, a more militaristic international politics, and a domestic politics of fear and repression.

They particularly targeted Latin America. Reagan launched the brutal Contra War against Nicaragua's Sandinista Revolution, while Thatcher sent warships to the South Atlantic to prevent Argentina from claiming the Malvinas (Falklands) Islands. John Paul II also

attacked the Sandinistas, all the while conducting a determined struggle to drive theology of liberation out of the Church.

## **UNDERMINING LIBERATION THEOLOGY**

This school of thought, which had arisen in the 1960s, sought to align the Church with those fighting for fundamental change and to distance it from the military-oligarchical power of U.S.-backed capitalism. It also carried out a dialogue with Marxists. Its rise represented a major split within the dominant classes, of which the Roman Catholic Church had long been a part, especially in Latin America.

One of theology of liberation's representatives, Ernesto Cardenal, became an important figure in revolutionary Nicaragua. Another, the El Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, was cruelly murdered by a military death squad in 1980, after calling upon rank-and-file soldiers to refuse to participate in the Army's violent repression of that country's Marxist-led revolutionary movement.

Everywhere, the proponents of liberation theology created "base communities," where laymen and women organized for social justice around the notion that Christian doctrine required standing beside the poor and oppressed. A major part of the origin of the Zapatista Movement in Chiapas lies within such communities.

Theology of liberation also found substantial support in Brazil, where it exercised an important influence within the Workers Party of Luis Ignacio "Lula" da Silva. Theology of liberation activists worked alongside Marxists in establishing Brazil's grassroots Landless Workers Movement (MST), which continues the anti-capitalist agenda that has been forsaken by Lula's Workers Party now that it is in power.

## **BOFF TOOK MEASURE of JOHN PAUL II**

Upon John Paul II's death, Leonardo Boff, one of the most important thinkers of the liberation theology movement, took the measure of his papacy. Boff, who was driven out of the clergy by the Vatican, wrote that John Paul II saw liberation theology as a "Trojan horse" for Communism:

"He convinced himself that in Latin America, Communism was the danger, whereas the true danger was savage and colonialist capitalism, with its anti-people and retrograde elites." To Boff, the root of Pope John Paul II's problem lay in his authoritarianism and elitism: "He took away the decision-making power from the synods of the bishops in subjecting them totally to papal authority, while at the same time limiting the power of the continental conferences of bishops, and of national ones. He marginalized the decision-making power of the laity, and denied the full citizenship of women in the Church community, relegating them to secondary positions, far from the altar and the pulpit."

"Like his principal counselor, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger [now Pope Benedict XVI], the Pope put forward an Augustinian vision of history, where what counts is only that which

passes through the mediation of the Church, which carries with it the supernatural concept of salvation... This position led him to a total incomprehension of Latin American theology of liberation, which affirmed that their liberation should be the work of the poor themselves.”

Boff concluded: “To the outside, he presented himself as a champion of dialogue, of liberty, tolerance, peace, and ecumenism, but within the Church he shuttered the right of expression, banned dialogue, and created a theology with powerful fundamentalist overtones” (LE MONDE, April 7, 2005).

## **RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM**

Boff is absolutely correct to link Pope John Paul II to religious fundamentalism. His accession in 1978 occurred during a period characterized by the rise of fundamentalism and intolerance in many societies. That year, Ayatollah Khomeini came to dominate the Iranian Revolution, before coming to power in 1979 and setting up a type of repressive theocracy that would have been unimaginable only a few years earlier.

During the same period, Protestant fundamentalists gained tremendous power in American politics, virulently anti-Muslim Hindu revivalists came to power in India, equally intolerant Jewish zealots became a decisive force in Israeli politics, and in the broader Muslim world, both Sunni and Shiite, a whole series of Islamic fundamentalist movements worked to supplant Marxism as ground for resistance to Western imperialism.

While John Paul II was not as openly reactionary as some of these currents, he and they could certainly unite around one point, hostility to the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. According to Hans Küng, a liberal theologian at the University of Tübingen who was also driven out by the Vatican, “This Pope has waged an almost spooky battle against modern women who seek a contemporary form of life.” As to Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI, his selection “will be considered by many Catholics to mean that the Church is absolutely unable to reform.” (NEW YORK TIMES, April 20, 2005).

## **GENDER AND SEXUALITY**

To become a bishop under John Paul II and Ratzinger, one had to have a history of uncompromising opposition to abortion, birth control, masturbation, premarital sex, divorce, homosexuality, married priests, female priests, euthanasia, and Marxism. Some progressives, for example in parts of the peace movement, have sought to play down these aspects and to stress John Paul II’s opposition to war and capital punishment.

However, these stances did not prevent the Vatican from indirectly supporting George Bush’s re-election campaign. It encouraged U.S. Church leaders to attack the mild liberalism of his opponent John Kerry, himself a Catholic, just as it had given tacit support to Reagan’s wars in Latin America. As the man who is now Pope Benedict XVI put it last year, in a letter released during the U.S. election campaign: “Not all moral issues have the same moral weight as abortion and euthanasia. For example, if a Catholic

were to be at odds with the Holy Father on the application of capital punishment or on the decision to wage war, he would not for that reason be considered unworthy to receive Holy Communion.”

Others have emphasized the Vatican’s move away from its thousand-year-old ideology of anti-Semitism under John Paul II’s papacy. But this is in keeping with a modern form of radical conservatism (as in the Reagan and Bush administrations) that has jettisoned the open anti-Semitism of the past and has allied itself firmly with the Israeli Right.

The spheres of gender and sexuality illustrate most clearly the retrogressive character of Pope John Paul II’s theology, and that of his successor, Benedict XVI. It is here, above all, that the Vatican has lost support in the industrially developed West, and among youth. As the Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman recounted shortly after John Paul II’s death, the pope addressed a stadium full of 100,000 youth in Chile in 1987, who joined him in renouncing the “demons” of avarice, greed, and war: “And then, the supreme pontiff got carried away, may have forgotten himself or who he was dealing with, how those youngsters had survived the years of tyranny. He asked that gathering of adolescents if they were ready to renounce the demons of sex--and there was no hesitation inside the genitals and heartbeat of those 100,000 bodies under the Andes, there was no hesitation in the 100,000 throats that shouted back: no!” (openDemocracy.net, April 8, 2005).

These policies have had real effects, as GUARDIAN columnist Polly Toynbee noted in 2003: “No one can compute how many people have died of AIDS as a result of [the pope’s] power, how many women have died in childbirth needlessly, how many children starved in families too large and poor to feed them. But it is reasonable to suppose these silent, unseen, uncounted deaths at his hand would match that of any self-respecting tyrant or dictator...It makes the sickly homilies about his simple piety impossible to let pass unchallenged.”

While they worked to hem in the freely expressed sexuality of youth and women, John Paul II and Benedict XVI have also sought to cover up decades of coerced sexuality within the Church, especially the sexual abuse of the young. Benedict XVI has even tried to blame these outrages on the sexual revolution of the 1960s! After Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston, whose diocese had the most flagrant and widespread sexual abuse of any in the U.S., was forced by public pressure to resign, he was kicked upstairs. As Law helped preside over John Paul II’s funeral, anti-Law fliers were handed out by critics, who were quickly taken away by Vatican police.

John Paul II has also been praised for his stance against totalitarian Communism, especially in his native Poland. But even here, where it involved physical bravery and adherence to principle in the face of Stalinist repression, there was something more at stake than the fight for freedom with which he draped himself. From the beginning, Pope John Paul II sought to channel the oppositional movements under Communism away from the type of socialist humanism that characterized the internal opposition in Poland and especially Czechoslovakia in the 1960s.

By the 1980s, Pope John Paul II--although he was not alone in this--was part of the process through which Poland's Solidarnosc movement moved away from the earlier politics of socialist humanism, toward a "self-limiting revolution" aimed at Western-style capitalist "democracy and civil society." This helped to insure that Communism was replaced, not by a "socialism with a human face," but by a harsh form of capitalism. Later, John Paul II helped to give post-Communist Polish politics a decidedly rightward slant, especially on women's rights, while also being careful to discourage a return to the Polish Church's older politics of anti-Semitism.

## **RELIGION AND LIBERATION**

How can anti-capitalist, peace, labor, feminist, and other movements for freedom respond to the Vatican's retrogressive politics? One danger to avoid here is the type of opportunism found in some sectors of the peace movement, where gender and sexuality are placed on the back burner in order to ally with religious conservatives against war. But an equally dangerous direction would be a return to the Enlightenment-based and often positivist stance of the anti-clerical Left a century ago, which made atheism and science the central dividing line between Left and Right. This view was often linked to a notion of the backwardness of the peasantry, and of rural people more generally.

This was never Marx's position, although it was held by other socialists, like Ferdinand Lassalle. To be sure, Marx shared the Enlightenment view that religion served as an ideological prop for class domination. This is behind his statement, in an 1843 critique of Hegel: "It is the opium of the people." Few are aware that Marx preceded this sentence with another, very different one: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions."

This second (really first) critique of religion emphasizes that it also expresses opposition to oppression. Here lies one of the reasons why the Catholic Church has maintained its hold on sectors of the oppressed over the ages, allowing it to survive particular political forms--like the feudal lords of medieval Europe--whose power it once sanctified.

While religion expresses "the sigh of the oppressed," it does so in an alienated form, however, for religion is also "alienated self-consciousness," as Marx wrote in 1844. Often, it offers otherworldly solutions, for example, putting off the reckoning with oppression indefinitely.

In its fundamentalist or reactionary manifestations, religion creates alienated channels for the expression of the anger of the oppressed. One example would be directing mass anger not against capitalism as such, but against "morally corrupt," or "greedy" capitalists. More ominously, it can target as ostensible oppressors the "irreligious"--or those of a different religion--as in Christian anti-Semitism. Or it can stir up murderous rage while espousing the sanctity of "life," as in the Terri Schiavo case.

However, not all expressions of religion as the "sigh of the oppressed" take such totally alienated forms. In the 1850s, Marx hailed the Taiping Rebellion a messianic peasant-

based movement with some roots in Christianity--as revolutionary development that could shake up China and the world. More recently, with both Latin American theology of liberation and the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, some forms of religion have become part of the language of liberation.

Therefore, it is always important to view religion not as an undifferentiated expression of reaction, but as a multi-faceted phenomenon. Even in the Roman Catholic Church today, 27 years of Pope John Paul II, and the selection of Benedict XVI, cannot stamp out completely the fires of liberation theology, or the challenges of feminism and gay/lesbian liberation.

This is not to underestimate the danger of someone like John Paul II or Benedict XVI at the helm of the Roman Church. When such a person has had philosophical training, which is true of both men, the danger is all the greater. John Paul II tried to wrap himself in humanism in his notion of defending "life," as he likened war and capital punishment to "the legal extermination of the unborn," his abusive term for a woman's right to choose.

Moreover, he argued that the modern liberal notions of freedom and the subject were at the root of Nazism and Communism: "If man can decide himself, without God, what is good and evil, he can also conclude that a group of men should be exterminated." Here, John Paul II was able to wrap in philosophical humanist language a deep anti-humanism that denies the very basis of democracy. Instead, we need to "decide ourselves" to reject such a dehumanized worldview, in favor of one based on the "actual corporeal human being, standing on firm and well-rounded earth, inhaling and exhaling all natural forces" (Marx, 1844 MANUSCRIPTS).