

MOCK THE CHURCH

Re-Imagining Resistance for the Euro-American Left

By Joel Schalit

“And just imagine, there are still some damned rabble going around saying that wine is the creation of the devil, and that it’s a sin, and that it’s an invention of the most diabolical order. But do you think that if wine had really been an invention of the devil, that Jesus would have given some to his mother to drink? To his very own mother? Because Jesus had so much love for his mother that even I don’t have for all the grappa in this world! I’m sure that God the Father, in person, instead of leaving it so late when he taught Noah this wonderful trick of crushing the grape and bringing forth wine, if instead, right from the start, he had taught Adam, even before Eve, then we wouldn’t be in this wretched state of a world that we are in now. We would all be in Paradise!”

So writes Dario Fo, 1997’s Nobel Prize-winning Italian playwright, in “Marriage at Cana,” the fourth section of *Mistero Buffo* (“Comic Mystery”), Fo’s celebrated collection of hysterically funny anti-religious monologues first published in 1969. By employing a word with a traditionally religious connotation as the title for a litany of protestations against the Catholic Church, Fo assumes the voice of an agonized believer who cannot fathom why his faith prohibits him from being able to enjoy the most basic of earthly pleasures.

Mistero Buffo reconstructs Bible stories and medieval European miracle tales and recasts these works for a modern audience in the mocking spirit of a *giulare* (“jester”) to dynamite the continued influence of the Catholic Church in 1960s Italy. As a contemporary *giulare*, Fo claimed membership in a long tradition of distinctly working class anti-clericalism by using the vernacular of feudal European criticisms of religious authority.

In a world where nationalism claims God’s authority, standing up to religion is a form of anti-fascism. Fo’s backwards look at medieval anti-clericalism points at ways to criticize religion creatively.

As the recent debate about the role of religious clothing in French public schools makes clear, even the traditionally secular Europe has finished its long vacation from God.

It’s not just due to the War on Terrorism and the culture clash taking place between Middle East and the West, either. Religion has been a looming political problem in Europe ever since the early 1980s, when Poland’s Solidarity movement took the lead role in helping overthrow the former Communist regime and helped reinstate the Catholic Church as a major force in national political life. Religious revivalism also expressed itself in the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, where the federation split along religious lines—Serbian Orthodox (Serbia), Islamic (Bosnia-Herzegovina) and Catholic (Croatia and Slovenia)—as much as along ethnic ones.

Nobody reflected on the long shadow these events cast over the future of religion on the western half of the continent. Does anyone remember former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic’s warnings about the “green tide” of Islam overtaking Christian Europe? He almost sounded like current Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and French National Front leader Jean Marie Le Pen. With Serbian special forces now serving alongside NATO peacekeepers in Afghanistan, the ideological continuum between Serbian anti-Islamic rhetoric during the early 1990s and that of western European politicians today is becoming clearer.

Instead of reactionary priests intoning against abortion, we have elected politicians in Europe who make pious statements about menacing civilizations, national purity, and the need to remember the continent’s cultural origins. We have the beginning dynamics of retro-nationalism to contend with.

Hence the need for a new kind of *giulare* to mock this new kind of religious authority.

To give his work a context, Fo began performances of *Mistero Buffo* with a multimedia slide show presentation



and lecture on the role of the *giulare* in medieval Europe.

During the Middle Ages, *giulares* traveled from town to town staging (frequently offensive) dramatic productions. Engaging in grotesque and parodic attacks on the powers that be, going in drag as devils and witches, playing improvised instruments which simulated fart noises and putting on fake trials of the wealthy, the nobility and the clergy (sometimes even pretending to skin and burn them), *giulares* provided their audiences with a taste of revolutionary catharsis. While this experience was symbolic, it didn't exist only in the realm of theatre: the *giulares'* productions had a prescient, quasi-democratic nature. In certain instances, their events even involved the participation of the clergy.

For example, at the end of an unnamed December festival, *giulares* and an accompanying crew of buffoons would enter a church and ritually confront the community's bishop, who according to custom would remove his priestly vestments and hand them over to the chief *giulare*. The *giulare* would then take the pulpit and launch an unflattering imitation of the bishop, affecting everything from his preaching mannerisms and style to the content of his sermons, thus criticizing his paternalism and subservience to feudal authorities.

To Fo's Marxist eyes, this exercise was revolutionary. Events like these anticipated a post-religious state of affairs

where it is acknowledged that faith is an instrument of political power. And the *giulare* was engaging in a typically modern act of demystification: co-opting worship services in order to demonstrate how they reinforce unequal class relationships, under cover of spirituality. While by no means a deviation from traditional left-wing wisdom about religion, one can sense the excitement in Fo's encounter with such medieval political theatre. Here was an example of working class anti-clericalism, absent of the doctrinal trimmings of the 20th century Italian left and its hatred of all things church-related, without the Communist Party vetting the proceedings—in other words, organic Marxism.

Fo's hybrid slideshow, lecture and performance was an unqualified success. Over thirty thousand people showed up for an outdoor staging of the event in Milan in 1974. While it would be hard to imagine political art drawing such a large audience today, what seems even more inconceivable is *Mistero Buffo's* suggestion that religion was still as much a political problem at the end of the twentieth century as it was during the era of knights and vassals. Hasn't Europe always been more secular than the United States and the Middle East?

But even from a non-Marxist perspective, the role that religion plays in politics today is more evident than it was when Fo first wrote *Mistero Buffo* in the late 1960s.

Religion as nationalism is new to the European left (although not to European Muslims). Yet, so is the invocation of religion by the European right, as it seeks

Photos by Isaac McKay-Randozzi

ways to justify its support for American colonial interests in the Islamic world. Since anti-clericalism is at its core preoccupied with the imbrication of religion and politics, any anti-nationalist ideology has to appropriate this concern in order to confront the new nationalist strains of contemporary European politics.

This is why works like *Mistero Buffo* remain so important. In a sense, reading *Buffo* today is the equivalent of Fo, in the 1960s, reading stories of medieval *giulare* humiliating the local clergy. The point isn't to look at how history keeps on repeating itself. Rather, it is to learn how to criticize the repetition of cultural ideologies—like religion—which continue to be re-invoked for reactionary reasons throughout history. With anti-globalization protestors donning sea turtle costumes while marching down Rome's Via Veneto to protest Berlusconi's positions on the Kyoto protocol, it's hard not to see a certain kind of continuing radical imagination at work that makes considering all of this literature—and all of these forgotten strategies for dealing with ideology and power—so important.

Similarly, what is so valuable about Fo's decision to recall the medieval criticisms of religion is how much it resonates with the contemporary political impulse to look to the past for ways to help navigate the difficulties of the present. For example, consider how the American media rationalized the traumatic events of September 11. The conflict was cast in light of political scientist Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis, which (as it was crudely restated) explained that the post-Cold War era would be characterized by a regression to pre-modern forms of conflict based on religious identities.

We heard that this was indeed an old fashioned war of religions and values that harkened back to the Middle Ages. The Bush Administration's use of explicitly religious terminology to rationalize the attacks—hosting the first official observation of the disaster in the National Cathedral, asking Americans to heal themselves through prayer—did little to diminish the relevance of Huntington's thesis. In many respects, each reinforced the other: Huntington's thesis for college-educated newspaper readers and public radio listeners; Bush's

piety for middle Americans more likely to get their news from talk radio and television news than the *New York Times*.

Consider the shock that greeted the 2002 Jerusalem explosion of Wafa Idris, the Al-Aksa Intifada's first female suicide bomber. Israeli and Arab commentators, security officials and politicians alike were completely taken aback by the fact that a woman had committed a highly ritualistic suicide, a role traditionally only played by men seeking to get into heaven. Add to the equation the fact that Idris was alleged to be a secular feminist because she divorced a devout Muslim husband, and voila: the imbrication of religion and politics in Idris' anti-colonial suicide becomes that much deeper.



In effect, Idris was her own special kind of *giulare*. She donned the male vestments of Islamic radicalism in order to both criticize the patriarchy of Islamic revolutionary activity and defy Israeli expectations about the gendered character of Palestinian revolutionary activity. Idris is a weird echo of the concerns voiced by Dario Fo and the Euro-American left, and their respective struggles against the invocation of faith in a world that has regressed to the barbarism of nationalist world warfare. Clearly, the history of anti-clericalism is still being written.

